

As semester ends in state, COVID-19 fears shrink while concerns of academic slide grow

By Peter Cameron
Wisconsin Watch

One family reported driving to the community library parking lot, sitting there for hours each day so their children could use the wifi to do homework in the car.

Another student reported having to do the same thing in the parking lot of the local McDonald's.

"I'm gaining weight," the student said.

Another family complained about the thousands of dollars they've spent per month on a private tutor for their children.

Those responses came from a survey of 3,227 Wisconsin parents and students in 16 Wisconsin districts — most from the northern, rural part of the state — conducted by Curtis Jones, a senior scientist at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Socially Responsible Evaluation in Education program. It found nearly half of the students were failing to keep up with homework as much as they had before the pandemic.

As the first full semester of U.S. students learning under the pandemic comes to a close, experts like Jones are particularly concerned about young people who already were behind. Only 15% of survey respondents said their child was learning as much as before the COVID-19 crisis. Some policymakers are pushing for a massive tutoring effort to help students catch up.

"Any type of negative impact on the education system hits people who have privilege less hard," Jones said. "They

can pick up that slack themselves. People who have less privilege, it's more impactful. It hits harder."

The full scope of the pandemic's effect on academic progress is still unknown in Wisconsin. As part of a pandemic relief bill, the state Legislature suspended student testing requirements for the 2019-20 school year and prohibited the Department of Public Instruction from issuing school and district report cards covering this school year.

Academic setbacks in rural schools could be related to how much face time teachers had with their students, especially those with poor internet access at home, said Kim Kaukl, executive director of the Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance.

And Jones' survey suggests that the children who were already vulnerable and behind will be most affected by the pandemic and virtual schooling. Other research mirrors that, finding the most severe declines in math performance.

In Wisconsin, living in a rural area is a disadvantage — especially at a time when many schools have had to close their doors and deliver education virtually. More than 40% of rural residents in Wisconsin lack access to high speed internet, according to the Public Service Commission, compared to about 30% nationally.

A state Department of Public Instruction survey found that students in 69% of the 408 school districts that provided online instruction in the spring lacked access to reliable wifi or internet.

That's certainly the case for

the Hellenbrand family, who live on a small farm in the village of Dane about 20 miles north of Madison. The family's four children, ages 5 to 12, have had to attend school virtually all semester.

"The internet has not been our friend," said mother Amy Jo Hellenbrand during a school day last month. "It's been down a lot today. They've been kicked off their meetings quite a few times. That's been the story recently."

One of her daughters, 9-year-old Reagan, was more succinct.

"Our internet sucks," she said.

The local school district, Lodi, has kept its buildings closed but plans to reopen for the second semester. Students will initially attend half time, four days a week, with deep cleaning and teacher planning time on Wednesdays.

"It's been rough," Hellenbrand said. "They're done with being homeschooled, and I'm kind of at the same point — the point of being burnt out."

Chaotic semester better than feared

Partly due to concerns about internet connectivity, most rural school districts in Wisconsin started the academic year in person, Kaukl said. Most have also closed at least once — if not several times — and went all-virtual temporarily due to positive COVID-19 tests or community spread, he said. That has jostled students between learning in the classroom and learning from home.

But initial fears that schools — most if not all of which mandate mask wearing and social distancing — would become superspreader sites have not occurred.

The Albany School District, 30 miles south of Madison, started with its kindergarten through sixth graders in the building, gradually adding in-person instruction for middle and high school students. The district briefly closed schools early in the semester due to a positive COVID-19 test and has required a few students and staff to quarantine during the semester. But that's been manageable for the 300-student district.

"If you would have told me that we would reach the middle of December and have as few outbreaks as we've had, knock on wood," said Steve Elliott, a member of the school board and a father of three elementary school children there. "That's been a real shock and a blessing."

Emerging research finds infection rates in schools reflect rates in the community — and in-person instruction has not been a major source of viral spread. A 40,000-person study in Iceland found that children

15 and younger were about 50% less likely than adults to get infected and to transmit the virus. Nearly all transmissions to children came from adults, the study found.

Some school administrators and teachers in Wisconsin are finding the same thing.

The 500-student Hurley School District, on the border with the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, has yet to close its building this year, said Superintendent Kevin Genisot. There have been positive tests and quarantines of students and staff, but all have been traced to out-of-school transmission. In fact, the only times the district has even learned of cases inside its walls is when someone close to the student, such as a parent, tests positive, and then the child subsequently does too.

"If we could put a green light above every student and staff member's head right now, we know there would be lights blinking (telling us) they were positive and asymptomatic," Genisot said. "They cycle through and then they're done, and then someone else could be. That's going to happen for some time."

The release of new evidence has prompted the Public Health Madison & Dane County, which prohibited schools from opening to most students in August, to reverse itself last month, saying in-person learning can be safe. That was after the Wisconsin Supreme Court in September temporarily blocked the public health order; a final decision on the matter is pending. Still, a recent Madison Teachers Inc. survey found more than 90% of instructors oppose returning to in-person schooling.

Some districts have made extraordinary efforts to keep students in school buildings.

No matter the weather, Hurley School District props open its doors in the mornings so hundreds of students don't touch the handle on the way inside. That also improves air circulation. Genisot said the district has a "hard rule" about maintaining 6 feet of distance and making sure no one spends more than 15 minutes close to anyone else.

"We believe that the processes and practices we have in place — and a little bit of luck, let's be honest — have let us remain open," he said, adding, "You can't replace being in the building."

The 235-student La Farge School District in western Wisconsin is using a hybrid model with its middle and high school students, in which two groups each come in two days per week. But high rates of COVID-19 in the community forced the district to twice send students home to learn virtually for two weeks.

Even then, a group of 15 to 20 older students who needed the extra attention came in every day, said Amy Lund, a high school social studies teacher there.

"They know and we know that school is better when kids are here," Lund said. "Where (students) had been last winter compared to where they were this fall wasn't good. We want to alleviate that as much as possible while still maintaining safety protocols."

Research: Virtual learning less effective

Early studies from research organizations NWEA and McKinsey & Company suggest that students are falling behind, especially in math.

The NWEA study found that while student achievement in grades 3 through 8 was comparable to previous years in reading, progress in math dipped as much as 10 percentile points from levels before the pandemic.

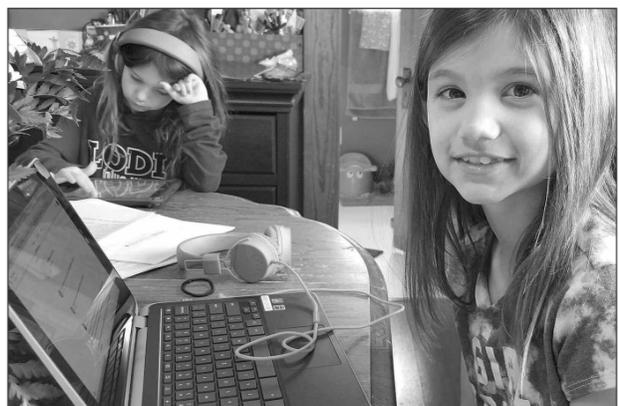
Even those declines likely understate the problem, researchers noted, because "student groups especially vulnerable to the impacts of the pandemic were more likely to be missing from our data."

The McKinsey study found



Matthias and Adara Millar play piano at their home in Blue Mounds, Wis., on Dec. 20, 2020. The Millar children have been attending school in the Barneveld School District virtually for much of the semester. Their dad, Matt Millar, says it's been difficult to manage and monitor their schooling while also working from home. Recently, all of the Millar children returned to in-person instruction.

Photo by Coburn Dukehart/Wisconsin Watch



Reagan Hellenbrand, right, and her sister Lydia attend school virtually from their home in Dane, Wis., in 2020. "It's been rough," says their mother Amy Jo Hellenbrand. "They're done with being homeschooled, and I'm kind of at the same point — the point of being burnt out."

Photo courtesy of the Hellenbrand family

that, on average, students started school in the fall about three months behind expectations in math. Students of color were about three to five months behind, while white students were behind by about one to three months. In reading, students were only about a month and a half behind historical averages.

The pandemic could aggravate and expand already existing achievement gaps, experts say.

"We'll find out what the impact is once things open back up and everybody starts taking the same assessments again," Jones said.

Students can be vulnerable for a variety of reasons — lack of internet access, poverty, lack of motivation.

Elliott fears that allowing students to study virtually will make it even harder for educators to intervene and engage with at-risk children.

"I one hundred percent believe that that is a year where if a kid wants to slip through gaps, it's a lot easier," Elliott said.

"We're going to lose kids," Genisot agreed. "Every district is going to lose kids. Your high at-risk kids that are not in attendance are in serious jeopardy of not graduating."

Even students without significant risk factors might take a hit. Matt Millar has good internet at his rural home in Blue Mounds, but when his three young children were forced to learn virtually from home when the Barneveld School District temporarily closed in November, the divorced dad had to manage them alone while trying to do his own work.

"It feels impossible at times," he said.

The two younger Millar children, 7-year-old Sterling and 6-year-old Matthias, went back to in-person class on Dec. 14, and the district brought back older students, including 10-year-old Adara, right before winter break.

Millar said he is "super grateful" his children are back in school.

Pandemic's full impact not yet clear

Lund believes the pandemic learning gap will be apparent when life gets a little closer to "normal."

"The kids just have not advanced at the same rates," she said. "We're all just going to have to work a little harder to get kids up to where they

should be."

To counter the blows the pandemic has landed on student progress, a bipartisan group of senators is advocating for expansion of national service programs including AmeriCorps and Senior Corps to add 300,000 members to work individually with at-risk children.

Johns Hopkins researcher Robert Slavin is pushing President-elect Joe Biden for a similar effort, arguing that simply reopening schools "will not heal the damage students have sustained to their educational progress" — especially in high-poverty schools.

Fear of COVID-19 also has moved more children into homeschooling, and they may not come back, potentially jeopardizing the per-pupil funding that public school districts receive, said Mara Tieken, an associate professor of education at Bates College in Maine.

Tieken, who focuses on rural schools, wants states to move away from education funding models that rely heavily on property taxes, which can force poorer districts to choose between cutting education budgets or raising taxes on property owners who can't afford it.

In a report released by the DPI last month, 343 school districts in Wisconsin — 82% — said they anticipated an increase in spending for the 2020-21 school year due to the pandemic. Nearly one-third are expecting an increase of more than \$100,000 in personnel costs.

Tieken advocates for more equity — giving districts whose students need more help more money.

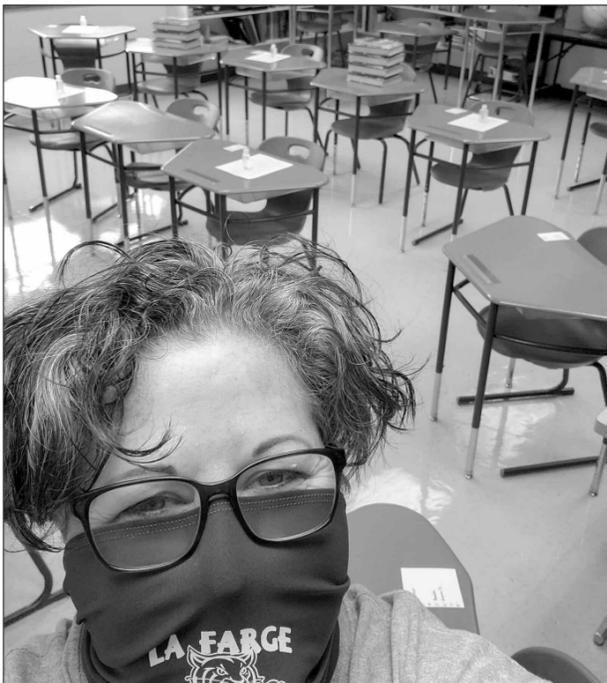
"We're going to have groups of students that need more support, that need more attention, that need more resources," she said.

In Wisconsin, Gov. Tony Evers, a Democrat and former state Superintendent of Public Instruction, has pushed to tweak the state's funding formula to give school districts with more poor students a greater share, but the Republican-controlled Legislature has resisted the idea.

Amy Jo Hellenbrand said she has noticed her own children's lack of academic progress in the way they speak and make grammar mistakes.

"They need to be back in school," Hellenbrand said. "That was always my view."

Reagan agreed, adding: "I can't wait."



La Farge High School social studies teacher Amy Lund is seen in her classroom in September. Lund says mandatory face coverings and distancing have been integrated into student life. But because of rising case numbers in Vernon County, the school district moved all instruction for its 6th through 12th graders online for the first two weeks of October.

Photo courtesy of Amy Lund



Matthias, Sterling and Adara Millar play in the snow outside their home in Blue Mounds, Wis., on Dec. 20, 2020. The Millar children have been attending school in the Barneveld School District virtually for much of the year. Their dad, Matt Millar, says supervising their virtual schooling felt "impossible at times."

Photo by Coburn Dukehart/Wisconsin Watch